How long do elephants live? African, Asian and a lifespan ladder

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How long do elephants live? A wild African elephant's median is 56 years and an Asian elephant's is 47. Where each number came from, and a ladder of other animals.

A wild African elephant's median lifespan is 56 years, and an Asian elephant's is 47 years. Both numbers are real, and they come from different places, so they're a good way to learn what a lifespan number is actually a number of. Here is where each one came from, and then a ladder of other animals so you can see where elephants stand.

The two elephant numbers

- African elephant · Lifespan: 56 years · What the number is: median, in a well-studied wild population · Where it came from: the Federal Register, in a 2024 rule from the US Fish and Wildlife Service
- Asian elephant · Lifespan: 47 years · What the number is: median, for females · Where it came from: the Smithsonian's National Zoo

A median is the middle number. Half of the group lived less than that and half lived more. It isn't the oldest an elephant gets, and it isn't quite the same thing as an average.

Look at the third column. One number is about a single well-studied group of wild African elephants. The other is about female Asian elephants. Because they describe different groups, I wouldn't use them to say that African elephants outlive Asian ones. Peabody shows each number with its note and its source so you can see what it really is. Both species are listed as endangered on the IUCN Red List, which Peabody reads from Wikidata.

Why one animal gets many numbers

Ask three websites how long an elephant lives and you may get three answers. One might give the oldest ever seen, one a typical life, one a life in a zoo. None of them has to be wrong. What matters is the label: "median", "average", "up to", "in the wild", "in human care". Peabody's guide to where the numbers come from explains the order we look in: Wikidata first, then United States government pages, then the National Zoo.

A lifespan ladder

Here are some of the animals on Peabody, shortest-lived first. Read the middle column carefully, because it says what kind of number you're looking at.

- Animal: Monarch butterfly · How long: 0.04 to 0.1 years, about 2 to 5 weeks · Who says: US Fish and Wildlife Service

- Animal: American robin · How long: 1 to 2 years, in the wild · Who says: Smithsonian's National Zoo
- Animal: Giant Pacific octopus · How long: 3 to 5 years · Who says: NOAA Fisheries
- Animal: Cheetah · How long: 8 to 10 years, in the wild · Who says: Smithsonian's National Zoo
- Animal: Bald eagle · How long: 20 years, average · Who says: National Park Service
- Animal: Spotted salamander · How long: 20 to 30 years · Who says: National Park Service
- Animal: Polar bear · How long: 25 years, average, in the wild · Who says: National Park Service
- Animal: Asian elephant · How long: 47 years, median, females · Who says: Smithsonian's National Zoo
- Animal: African elephant · How long: 56 years, median, well-studied wild population · Who says: Federal Register (US Fish and Wildlife Service)
- Animal: Green sea turtle · How long: 70 years · Who says: NOAA Fisheries
- Animal: Blue whale · How long: 80 to 90 years, estimated average, in the wild · Who says: NOAA Fisheries
- Animal: Aldabra giant tortoise · How long: more than 100 years · Who says: Smithsonian's National Zoo

A few things jump out. A small spotted salamander lives 20 to 30 years, longer than a wild cheetah's 8 to 10. A giant Pacific octopus is very clever and lives only 3 to 5. And the elephants, big as they are, sit in the middle of the ladder: a green sea turtle, a blue whale and an Aldabra giant tortoise all have longer numbers.

There's one more on the page I'd treat carefully. The American lobster's number is 100 years, from NOAA Fisheries, but Peabody keeps a note beside it: only some lobsters may reach that, and a lobster's exact age is hard to determine. A number with a "may" in it is still worth showing. It just shouldn't be read as a promise.

Try this at the table

Before you open any page, ask your child to put three animals in order, shortest life to longest. Then check them against the ladder. Wrong guesses are the fun part.

Next, stand an Asian elephant next to an Aldabra giant tortoise in Compare Two. Both are drawn at true size beside a child, and the page shows their lifespans side by side. For more, there's the list of the longest-living animals, the how long do animals live guide, and a quiz called How long do I live?. You can also pick any two animals yourself.

Peabody also has a checked size for the African elephant: the Smithsonian's Africa's Elephant Kingdom educator guide says adult males can grow to 13 feet (4 metres) tall and weigh 12,000 pounds (about 5,440 kilograms), so its page draws it to scale beside a child. Where a

number is missing, a page says "no checked number yet" rather than guessing.

Questions grown-ups ask

Do elephants live longer in zoos or in the wild?

Peabody doesn't have a checked number that compares the two, so I'm not going to guess. Our two elephant numbers are each about a specific group, and each says which. That's the honest limit of what I can tell you.

What is the oldest elephant ever?

Peabody doesn't have a checked number for that yet. I'd rather show a typical lifespan with its source than a record I can't check.

How is a median different from an average?

To find a median, put the numbers in order and take the one in the middle. An average adds them all up and shares the total out evenly. One very long-lived animal pulls an average up, but it doesn't move the median much.

Peabody (peabody.kids) is free through the end of 2026, with no ads. When you've had enough of numbers, the library has stories to read next.

Free at peabody.kids/blog/how-long-do-elephants-live